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ABSTRACT

This paper considers theory and research on identity development in deaf children and concludes that the exclusively oral method of instruction is not conducive to healthy identity development. The importance of interpersonal communication in identity development from the viewpoints of both sociological and psychoanalytical theories of identity is considered in discussion of the theories of G. H. Mead, L. Krappmann, and E. H. Erikson. The implication is drawn that most deaf people will not be able to achieve successful identity development during their adolescence if they have to depend on spoken language communication in essential areas of their lives. Educators are urged to provide sign language communication for deaf children at early ages. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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(Ahrbeck, Bernd No. 280/Part 1)

Ahrbeck, B.: Problems of Identity Development of Deaf Children

1. Introduction

However different educational concepts for supporting deaf children may be, they have one thing in common: all of them want to contribute to the deaf children's identity development. In this context, the term 'identity' is often used in a colloquial, unscientific sense: It is not truly integrated in many educational concepts, and more often than not merely serves to justify the concept.

For this reason, another path will be taken here. The issue is, first and foremost, to carry out a scientific evaluation of the possibilities and limitations of the identity development of deaf people - depending on the respective system of communication, spoken language and sign language. To this end, I will present the results of an extensive theoretical analysis (Ahrbeck 1992/1993). Only then can we consider the educational concepts.

To be able to explain oneself fully to other people is a wish common to both hearing and deaf people. This need is of essential importance to every human being. On the one hand, this is about presenting oneself as a complete person and being perceived as such a person by others. But there is also an inner need to achieve a meaningful relation to one's self for one's entire life-span. This presupposes the possibility of essentially unlimited communication.

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Without extensive and full communicative exchange with other people, a human being cannot develop an identity or self. Everybody needs to have an understanding of what forms the core, the center, of their person. They are dependent on an integral and unified relation to themselves in the sense of an identity or a self if they want to lead a life without serious psychic strain.

2. Personal Communicational Possibilities of Deaf People in the System of Spoken Language

The crucial question in the personal development of deaf people is whether spoken language can become a fully serviceable language for them. This has numerous important consequences for the ability to relate linguistically.

The relational aspect of communication is essentially defined paralinguistically and extralinguistically, for example, facial expression and gestures. Paralinguistic means: Everybody speaks with a certain basic volume and basic pitch, with a special sequence of intonation and stress, an individual speech tempo and pause patterns, certain noise additions etc. By varying these means, the speaker can express various intentions, clarify his or her purpose or make them unambiguous in the first place. In this way, he or she gives a highly individual meaning to language (Wunderlich 1972).

The speaking voice of deaf people does not allow for true personal expression in this sense.

Because of the lack of paralinguistic means of differentiation, essential areas of personal communication are not accessible to deaf people in the system of spoken language. Spoken language thus becomes a purely functional language, only allowing communication on a surface level. It cannot be a mother tongue.

The point at issue here is the inherently limited efficiency of spoken language to deaf people, irrespective of its specifically didactic use (native language or systematic linguistic approach). This is the case for all deaf people, including those who have very good spoken language skills.

Deaf people are also significantly limited in their extralinguistic means of expression and understanding. The extralinguistic communication of hearing people is linked inseparably to the overall structure of spoken language.

3. The Problem of Deaf People's Identity Development

Considering this background, we can now answer the question of deaf people's chances of developing their identity in the system of spoken language. The theoretical frame of reference for this analysis is made up by the two most important theoretical complexes on the problem of identity in educational theory: Sociological theory in the tradition of G.H.Mead (1973/1987), and the psychoanalytical theory of identity of Erikson and his successors (1974/1988).

According to Mead, deaf people cannot develop a 'complete self'. Mead demands a highly differentiated and multi-layered encounter in interaction, which is hardly possible to achieve for deaf people, even if they are fully proficient in spoken and written language. The interaction with individual hearing people is widely limited because of personal communication barriers. Seldom, will it be possible for deaf people to form complex personal relationships with a significant number of interacting hearing partners. Mead's theory presupposes language skills, which in interaction with hearing people means spoken language skills, to such a high degree that it will not be possible for most deaf people to achieve a satisfactory balance between the role expectations of other people and their own needs. Under these conditions, it is hardly possible to develop a reflexive relation to oneself.

Krappmann (1975), a German author, succeeds in overcoming some of the defects of Mead's theory. In particular, he puts the abilities which must be present in order to develop an identity in concrete terms: detachment from roles and role taking, tolerance of ambiguities and presentation of identity.

It is often not possible for deaf people to perceive subtle differentations in the role expectations of hearing people and decode them in a sufficient degree. Consequently, it will be all the more difficult for them to reflect on and interpret those role expectations and achieve a detachment from these roles. Without detachment from the role, it becomes more difficult in turn to put oneself into the other person's role in the sense of 'role taking' and to

anticipate it successfully. In order to stand the stress involved and to be able to continue to communicate intensively, deaf people need an exceptional degree of ambiguity tolerance of the ability to stand tension. Very often, deaf people will not succeed in this, because spoken language sometimes puts extreme demands upon them. To this are added considerable difficulties in the presentation of their identity to hearing people. This means the ability to present oneself in ones personal uniqueness, without denying any aspects of the self. This is linked to highly differentiated skills in spoken language, personal means of expression and elaborately organized role play. The individual abilities necessary for the development of identity interact with each other: The difficulties encountered in each of these individual abilities are thus multiplied, so that the chance for deaf people to develop an identity in interaction with hearing people is very limited in Krappmann's theoretical model as well.

From a sociological viewpoint, deaf people can only develop an identity when they are able to communicate without limitations, including extensive opportunities of personal expression and understanding. Therefore, deaf people are indispensably dependent, for the sake of their identity development, on sign language and 'the world of the deaf'. Only sign language will open extensive personal communication opportunities to them (Prillwitz 1986).

From a psychological perspective, too, the identity development of deaf people in a 'hearing world' can only be achieved in a fragmented and insufficient way.

Psychological theories of identity are based less on actual interaction than sociological ones,

they look at the inner world of experience in a context of life-history. The massive barriers in communication with hearing people show their effects on deaf children very early on, namely, at the time when spoken language starts to assume a symbolic character. These barriers accompany all phases of development and impede the solution of conflicts adequate to the respective age, starting with the early problem of detachment and autonomy via oedipal conflicts up to adolescent problems of detachment. All in all, deaf children and adolescents must face the immensely difficult task of integrating experiences from areas of life which are communicatively disparate and in part difficult to access.

According to Erikson, a person's feeling of unity and continuity in their life span, and the trust that other people see them in the same way, is the central indicator of successful identity development. Most deaf people will not be able to achieve such a feeling during their adolescence if they had to depend on spoken language communication in essential areas of their lives. Even in individual cases it must be doubtful whether this is at all possible.

4. Conclusions

The available knowledge on the identity development of deaf people has far-reaching educational consequences: It is no longer possible to choose the exclusively oral method in deaf education.

We must be very critical, therefore, of such concepts of so-called 'education to hearing and

speaking', which are still oriented towards hearing standards of normality. Still wanting to do entirely without sign language communication in decisive phases of development, they ignore elemental insights of identity research (Ahrbeck 1994a/b). Deaf children must come into contact with sign language at a very early age, in early rehabilitation and starting with the first grade in school. This is the only way to ensure that the personal communication processes necessary to identity development will be successful.

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Ahrbeck, B.: Problems of Identity Development of Deaf Children
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Abstract

From the point of view of sociological and psychoanalytical theories of identity, the identity development of deaf people who are solely dependent on the communication system of spoken language is seriously threatened. Especially disastrous is the fact that they cannot express themselves fully and in a differentiated manner in spoken language. They lack the paralinguistic and extralinguistic communicational opportunities which are indispensable for a personal encounter. Spoken language remains a purely functional language to deaf people, useful on an external level, but not fit for really expressing themselves as persons.

Since an identity can only be developed where there is unlimited communication and extensive opportunities for personal expression and understanding, deaf people are highly dependent on the deaf community. They need their own language, sign language, which can be considered a complete language system, in order to develop their identity.

This insight has far-reaching educational consequences. For the sake of their identity development, deaf children must already be prepared in school for a life in the world of deaf people as well as for that in the world of the hearing. It is therefore no longer possible to choose the exclusively oral method.